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ABSTRACT

This digest examines reading approaches, identifies characteristics of fluent readers, and makes suggestions for developing reading instruction for adult English language learners. The reading instruction methods described include the phonics, psycholinguistic, interactive, and critical literacy approaches. Fluent readers are defined as those who read with a purpose, read quickly, use a variety of strategies, interact with the text, evaluate the text critically, expect to understand the text, and usually read silently. Drawing on recent research in reading instruction, seven general reading proficiency activity types are described, including: use of texts that meet student needs and are interesting; early instruction in letter recognition and sound-symbol correspondences, particularly for students not schooled in the Roman alphabet; teaching a variety of reading strategies; use of prereading activities; teaching evaluation of texts for implicit values and assumptions; use of texts containing familiar words and grammatical structures; and use of extensive reading. Contains 18 references. (Adjunct ERIC Clearinghouse on Literacy Education) (MSE)

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by Carol VanDuzer
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Reading and the Adult English Language Learner

by Carol VanDuzer
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Concern about adults' reading abilities has grown since the National Adult Literacy Survey (NALS) indicated that nearly 25% of the U.S. adult population had difficulty performing basic literacy tasks in English, involving reading documents (e.g., time tables, forms, and maps) and prose (e.g., newspaper articles, instructions on medicine bottles) and performing numeracy tasks (e.g., computing hours, calculating interest rates) (Kirsch, Jungeblut, Jenkins, & Kolstad, 1993). Although the extent of the literacy problem is under debate, policymakers, educators, and the general public are concerned that many adults—both native and nonnative English speakers—lack reading, writing, and functional skills necessary for living in a literate society (Wiley, 1994).

This digest reviews reading approaches, identifies characteristics of fluent readers, and makes suggestions for developing reading instruction for adult English language learners.

Reading Approaches

Most of what is known about reading comes from first language reading research. English as a second language (ESL) teachers need to consider how this research may or may not apply to reading in a second language. The following is a discussion of the approaches behind reading instruction.

Phonics. The predominant approach to reading in the 1950s and 1960s was "bottom up," based on the *phoneme* or smallest meaningful unit of sound. Readers derive meaning in a linear manner, first decoding letters, then words, phrases, and sentences to make sense of print. Rapid word recognition is important to this approach, which emphasizes sight reading of words in isolation. When word recognition becomes automatic, the reader is not conscious of the process (Gough, 1972). Recent research has again focused attention on the role that this decontextualized component of reading ability plays in the reading process (Oakhill, Beard, & Vincent, 1995).

Psycholinguistic. Through the late 1960s and 1970s, the psycholinguistic or "top down" approach to reading, where meaning takes precedence over structure, became dominant. Although readers make use of sound-letter correspondence and syntactic knowledge, they draw on their experiential background knowledge (schema) to predict the meaning of the text and then read to confirm or correct their predictions (Goodman, 1967; Smith, 1971).

Interactive. Approaches that draw on schema theory are also referred to as interactive approaches. The reader and text interact as the reader uses prior background knowledge and knowledge from the text to derive meaning (Grabe, 1991; Hood, Solomon, & Burns, 1996). How this happens is still being explored by second language reading researchers.

Other reading approaches are also considered interactive (Grabe, 1991; Hudson, 1998). These approaches, often the subject of first language research, view the reading process as the interaction of both bottom up and top down skills. They focus on how the various aspects of reading (e.g., word recognition, eye movement, and background knowledge) contribute to the reading process.

Critical Literacy. In the 1980s and 1990s, psycholinguistic views of reading have been questioned by a social theorist perspective that regards reading as both a social and psychological activity. Critical theorists, including Freire (1983), Gee (1990), and Street (1993), view reading as a social process that takes into account the relationship and interaction between author and reader. Meaning flows from an understanding of the cultural, social, and political contexts in which the reading takes place (Hood et al., 1996).

Characteristics of Fluent Readers

Reading is an active, complex process of comprehending written language, encompassing many different skills. The approaches described above grew out of research on reading; they provide insight into what good readers do and can help adult English learners become fluent readers in English. Following are characteristics of fluent readers.

Fluent readers

- read with a purpose (to get information or for pleasure) and understand the purpose of different texts (e.g., ads to encourage buying, editorials to present and influence opinions, recipes to give instructions);
- read quickly, automatically recognizing letters and words, maintaining a flow that allows them to make connections and inferences that make the text understandable;
- use a variety of strategies, depending on the text, to read efficiently (e.g., varying reading speed, predicting what will happen next, previewing headings and illustrations);
- interact with the text, making use of background knowledge as well as the information on the printed page;
- evaluate the text critically, determining whether they agree or disagree with the author;
- expect to understand the text and get meaning from it; and
- usually read silently.

Suggestions for Developing Reading Instruction

Knowing what good readers do and comparing this with the strategies used by learners in their classes will enable ESL teachers to gauge learners' needs. Adult English language learners come with varied reading backgrounds and experiences. Some are fluent readers in their native languages; some are not. Their view of literacy will be influenced by the literacy practices of their culture. Yet, they all will share the experience of learning to read in English, and they will approach reading differently from the way native speakers approach it (Rance-Roney, 1997). The following activities can help learners develop reading proficiency. The choice of activity, however, depends on the needs of the learners, the nature of the text, and the demands of the reading task.

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Reading Proficiency Activities

1. Because good readers read with a purpose, learners should read texts that meet their needs and are interesting. Teachers can choose texts, or let the learners choose texts, that are relevant to the learners' lives. They also need to be exposed to texts that they are likely to encounter in everyday life, such as newspapers and magazines, work memos, schedules, and medical instructions.

2. In order to develop automatic recognition skills, learners who are preliterate or literate in a language with a non-Roman alphabet should be given opportunities to develop letter recognition and sound-symbol correspondence skills. This should not be done in isolation, but with familiar texts that they have practiced orally or heard before (Hood et al., 1996). For example, learners can identify words that begin with a certain sound in a dialogue they know. Learners who are literate in their own language may find phonics instruction unproductive unless differences between their native language and English are pointed out. Spanish speakers, for example, need to know that the letter "a" can express more than one sound in English.

Vocabulary development also plays a role in automaticity. In texts where vocabulary may not be familiar, teachers can introduce key vocabulary in prereading activities that focus on language awareness, such as finding synonyms, antonyms, derivatives, or associated words (Hood et al., 1996). Modified cloze exercises, where examples of the target structure (e.g., prepositions) are deleted from a text and learners fill in as many blanks as they can, are also helpful.

3. Using appropriate strategies for various reading tasks increases comprehension, but acquiring an array of strategies is a long and difficult process (Grabe, 1995). Nevertheless, such strategies as skimming for the main idea, scanning for specific information, predicting what a text is about or what will happen next, and making use of the context and illustrations to discover word meanings are critical for English language learners beyond the beginning level.

4. Prereading activities that introduce the text encourage learners to use their background knowledge (Eskey, 1997). Class members can brainstorm ideas about the meaning of a title or an illustration and discuss what they know. The teacher can highlight cultural assumptions inherent in the writing. Awareness of various text types and their styles (advertisements, recipes, editorials) is also helpful.

5. Evaluating texts for implicit values and assumptions is another important reading skill. Reading texts that present different opinions or different descriptions of the same situation help develop an awareness of how language reflects values (Hood et al., 1996). Texts that present an issue without presenting a solution, such as "Dear Abby" letters (without the replies), can lead to discussion and writing about differing points of view (Auerbach, 1992).

6. Good readers expect to understand what they are reading. Therefore, texts should contain words and grammatical structures familiar to the learners (Eskey, 1997). However, it is not always easy to find texts that are both understandable and interesting for adult English language learners to read. Authentic reading material can often be found by the learners themselves, who have written pieces to share with each other.

7. Extensive reading for a sustained, uninterrupted period of time is not only valuable for developing vocabulary but is also an important way to develop reading proficiency and language acquisition in general (Grabe, 1991; Krashen, 1993). In class, learners can engage in Sustained Silent Reading (SSR) of materials they have chosen themselves. They can be encouraged to read outside of class by maintaining (and periodically turning in) reading logs that list what they have read and by making one- to three-minute oral presentations recommending a book, story, or article to their classmates (Dupuy, Tse, & Cook, 1996).

Conclusion

Much research has been concerned with first language reading and has generated many approaches to teaching reading. However, there is a growing body of literature on both foreign language academic reading and second language reading. All three areas contribute to the understanding of the reading process and have implications for instructional practice. Teachers who are aware of these reading approaches can tailor reading instruction to meet the needs and goals of adult English language learners.

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